School Meals

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Español (Spanish)

What Are School Meal Programs?

Many schools provide students with access to meals through federal school meal programs including the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program. These programs are administered by the US Department of Agriculture and state agencies by reimbursing schools for providing healthy meals to students.

Who Can Participate in School Meal Programs?

All students can participate in school meal programs, and some students are eligible to receive free or reduced-price meals.

What about meals and snacks when students are out of school?

- Programs like the National School Lunch Program's Afterschool Snack Service, the At-Risk Snack and Meals component of the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) offer financial support to provide children and youths with nutritious snacks and meals. CACFP and SFSP specifically reach children from low-income areas.
- School food service departments have experience following food safety and nutrition guidelines. This makes them strong candidates for serving as a Child and Adult Care Food Program or Summer Food Service Program sponsor.

Benefits of School Meals

School meals are nutritious.[1,2] Research shows that students who participate in the school meal programs consume more whole grains, milk, fruits, and vegetables during meal times and have better overall diet quality, than nonparticipants.[1,3] And, eating breakfast at school is associated with better attendance rates, fewer missed school days, and better test scores.[4–7] Meals served through these programs must meet specific nutrition requirements which include fruit, vegetables, and whole grains.

Schools can encourage students to participate in the school meal programs by:

- Providing meals that are nutritious and appealing.
- Obtaining input from students and parents about items they would like to see served in the meals.
- Ensuring that students have adequate time to eat their meal (at least 10 minutes for breakfast and 20 minutes for lunch).
- Preventing the overt identification of students who are eligible to receive free or reduced-price meals.

Healthy School Meals for All

The Community Preventive Services Task Force (CPSTF) recommends Healthy School Meals for All to increase participation in federal school meal programs and reduce school absenteeism. Healthy School Meals for All is expected to advance health equity by making it easier for students from households with lower incomes to access to free and healthy foods.

Resources

- CDC School Meals Toolkit
- Institute of Child Nutrition tools and trainings
- Alliance for a Healthier Generation resources for school meals
- FoodCorps
- *CDC School Health Guidelines to Promote Healthy Eating and Physical Activity*
- USDA HHFKA Implementation Research Brief Series
- At-Risk Afterschool Meals Component of CACFP
- National School Lunch Program Afterschool Snack Service
- Summer Food Service Program
- No Kid Hungry Best Practice Center
- FRAC Resource Library

References

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